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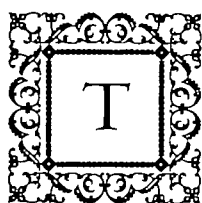
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Everyday Life in a European Hospital in the 1830s and 1840s

Conrad Faesi-Gessner's Drawings of the Old Zurich Hospital

HANS H. WALSER

I



THE old European hospitals have a past of their own, and although they often served other than purely medical purposes, the history of medicine is incomplete without hospital history. The sick, the old, and people disabled in some way, formed, together with the persons in charge of them, a community, and life in the larger European cities cannot be dissociated from the city hospital.¹ Since it was not alone sick persons who were admitted, there was a lively interchange between city population and hospital. Patients with various chronic diseases, persons unable to earn their living or unable to cope with practical needs of everyday life, or simply old persons living as boarders ('Pfründer'), were admitted as well. Hospitals of this type continued to exist under certain circumstances into our time, but the greater number of them were—at least in German-speaking countries—abolished in the last century and replaced by hospitals in the present-day sense of the word. This transformation not only met with certain difficulties including strong opposition, but it destroyed a particular form of common life. Part of this may have survived in psychiatric hospitals, but even those were rather specialized and became more and more so. The circumstances encountered in Zurich, a town of middle size but one of the most important in German-

For help received in the preparation of this paper I wish to thank Professor Lloyd G. Stevenson, Miss Madeline E. Stanton, Miss Elizabeth H. Thomson, Professor Erwin H. Ackerknecht, Mr. Rudolf Herzog, Mr. Emil Usteri, Mr. Konrad Ulrich, Mr. Steinmann, and Mrs. Molly Meerwein-Anderson.

1. See, for instance, the lively description by Ernest Renan of the hospital in his native town Tréguier (Brittany, France) as he knew it in the 1830s and 1840s: 'L'Hôpital général, ainsi nommé parce que la maladie, la vieillesse et la misère, s'y donnaient rendez-vous, était un bâtiment énorme, couvrant, comme toutes les vieilles constructions, beaucoup d'espace pour loger peu de monde. Devant la porte était un petit auvent, où se réunissaient, quand il faisait beau, les convalescents et les bien portants. L'hospice, en effet, ne contenait pas seulement des malades, il comprenait aussi des pauvres remis à la charité publique et même des pensionnaires, qui, pour un capital insignifiant, y vivaient chétivement, mais sans souci. Toute cette compagnie venait, à chaque rayon de soleil, à l'ombre de l'auvent, s'asseoir sur de vieilles chaises de paille. C'était l'endroit le plus vivant de la petite ville.' (*Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse* [Paris, 1967], first published in 1876).

speaking Switzerland, serve as a good illustration, the more so since we possess now—through the perspicacity of Dr. Clements C. Fry—documentation of quite unique value concerning life in the old and venerable Zurich Hospital during its last decades.

The beginnings of this hospital reach deep into the Middle Ages. The exact year of the foundation is not known, yet about 1200 a little institution of this kind existed. During the Reformation the hospital was enlarged and enriched by the incorporation of the adjacent buildings and precincts of the secularized Dominican monastery, whose church exists to the present day. In taking possession of the monastery, the hospital became legally and economically a very complicated organization, whose details cannot be discussed here.² In the following three centuries, the hospital was repeatedly enlarged, but always on the same premises within the city walls. The consequences of the Napoleonic period—far-reaching in a country occupied temporarily by foreign armies—brought about changes in the structure and the legal status of the hospital but they seem not to have influenced decisively the spirit and the everyday life of the institution.

The administrator of the hospital was its true leader, the competence of the medical men remaining rather restricted. Appointment was made by a board of physicians and laymen ('Wundgeschau'), and there were a house physician and a house surgeon elected by the government from the practitioners of the town who had to attend the patients regularly. Their scientific interests were rather scant, although important exceptions have to be mentioned³ especially in the period of the Enlightenment notable for its prominent physicians and scientists.⁴ But in 1833 there followed far-reaching modifications, in fact that year marked the beginning of the end for the venerable institution. In 1833 the University of Zurich was founded, and, in consequence, the newly appointed professors of the Medical Faculty (for internal medicine, surgery, and obstetrics) became directors of the respective departments, replacing the house doctors. The authority of the administrator (who was, of course, a layman), was, from then on,

2. For details of Zurich hospital history see the most valuable and competent work: *Zürcher Spitalgeschichte*. Herausgegeben vom Regierungsrat des Kantons Zürich (Zurich, 1951), 2 vols. Of special interest for the present paper are the contributions by B. Milt, P. Kläui, V. Elsasser, W. Loeffler, A. Brunner, E. Anderes, and Manfred Bleuler.

3. For example, an anatomical theatre was opened in the hospital in 1741 despite violent opposition from many citizens. Here J. R. Burkhard practiced the anatomo-clinical method before J. B. Morgagni's famous book was published (1761). See B. Milt (n. 2), also Edgar Frenk, *Johann Rudolph Burkhard's Syllogae Phainomenon Anatomikon, ein Einblick in das Krankengut des Zürcher Spitals vor 200 Jahren* (Aarau, 1958).

4. Distinguished Swiss doctors of the period were A. v. Haller, J. G. Zimmermann, S. A. D. Tissot, Th. Tronchin.

rather restricted and reduced to more administrative matters. The old hospital buildings could by no means meet the needs of the rising new medicine, represented in Zurich for instance by Johann Lucas Schoenlein, professor of internal medicine at Zurich University.⁵ So the old hospital was, step by step, replaced by new hospitals, erected in the near surroundings of the town. First, internal medicine and surgery moved in 1842 to a new building, a model for hospital buildings all over Europe; in 1867 and in 1870 the psychiatric patients were transferred to new clinics; and finally in 1875 the new maternity hospital was opened. This process of renewal was of course fostered by the doctors, and in the 1860s pamphlets had been published⁶ dealing with the many shortcomings of the old buildings and demanding a speedy reform. So the agony of the old institution lasted about four decades—from the 1830s to the 1870s. During this period the hospital still preserved something of its old, one might even say something of its medieval, spirit.⁷ Documents of this time of transition are therefore of particular value, and they contribute to the 'behaviorist approach' in medical history advocated lately by Ackerknecht.⁸

II

Through the kindness of Professor Lloyd G. Stevenson we are able to present here documentation that gives a deep insight into the old Zurich hospital. In the Clements C. Fry Collection of the Yale Medical Library, New Haven, Connecticut, there are a number of sketchbooks containing some fine drawings, whose great value as medical historical documents he saw at once.⁹ The artist could by no means have been a casual visitor. On the contrary, the drawings reveal a close familiarity with the place. The name of the artist, Conrad Faesi-Gessner,¹⁰ was known, but nothing more.

5. E. H. Ackerknecht, 'Johann Lucas Schoenlein 1793-1864,' *J. Hist. Med.*, 1964, 19, 131-138.

6. For more details, especially for all matters concerning local history, and for a fuller list of Faesi's 'Yale drawings' see Rudolf Herzog and Hans H. Walser, 'Johann Konrad Faesi-Gessner (1796-1870). Unbekannte Zeichnungen aus dem alten Zürcher Spital.' *Zürcher Taschenbuch für das Jahr 1969* (Zurich, 1968). (Buchdruckerei Berichthaus).

7. See B. Milt and P. Klæui (n. 2).

8. E. H. Ackerknecht, 'A Plea for a "Behaviorist Approach" in writing the history of medicine,' *J. Hist. Med.*, 1967, 22, 211-214.

9. Professor Lloyd G. Stevenson helped make it possible to work up Faesi's drawings in Zurich. Not only was most of the necessary material here, but this paper was written on the very spot where the drawings were made, for the wing of the old hospital where Faesi lived for many years was replaced in 1918 by the University library.

10. As the spelling of the proper names was not yet fully standardized, Faesi's name was written in different ways. Faesi himself preferred 'Conrad Fäsi.' After his marriage in 1826 he added, according to a custom still existing in Switzerland, his wife's maiden name to his. So we chose for this paper 'Conrad Faesi-Gessner.'

How great was our surprise when the artist proved to be no less than the administrator of the hospital himself! And how thoroughly he knew not only this place but the whole town and its inhabitants, we were soon to learn from his life history. At first we could find little trace of his existence. Only in the dictionary of Swiss artists could we find a few lines about Faesi and in Zurich art collections some rare little drawings. We are much indebted to Rudolf Herzog, former assistant to the Zurich City Archives, for his patient research. As a result the main facts of Faesi's biography are now known, and even a few hints of his personality, though shadowy it must remain, could be reconstructed. How quickly is a man forgotten, who scarcely more than a hundred years ago played an important role in the public life of his town!¹¹

III

Conrad Faesi-Gessner was a member of an old and well-known family. The Faesis belonged to the 'town-aristocracy,' and many of them were prominent in the cultural life of their native country and so remain to the present. One of the Faesis was wounded in the battle of Kappel in 1531, where Huldrych Zwingli, the Swiss reformer, was killed. Later, certain members of the family excelled in mathematics, in astronomy, and in geography. Very often they were ministers of the Zurich Zwinglian State Church, as was the father of our artist in his younger days. Later he resigned to become professor of history, geography, and aesthetics at the Art School of the town. J. W. Goethe, during his third journey to Switzerland in 1797, paid him a visit and may have seen the then youngest of father Faesi's children, the one-and-a-half-year-old Conrad.

Conrad Faesi was born on 31 March 1796 and christened 3 April at St. Peter's, the big church overlooking the Limmat river, so well-known to every visitor to the town. During his early years the family lived in the house that in 1838 became the former main building of Zurich University. He attended the usual schools and in 1816 was appointed secretary to the Zurich Supreme Court. At this time he was already a skillful draughtsman, as his fine drawing of a tribunal scene proves.¹² In 1825 he was elected first

11. Very recently a correspondence between Faesi and his friend Johann Caspar Ulrich (1796-1883) has been discovered. Ulrich was a distinguished lawyer, politician, and judge in the Zurich Supreme Court. The publication of this correspondence may throw new light on Faesi's personality. (We wish to express our thanks to Dr. Konrad Ulrich, Zurich, for this detail.)

12. This drawing is preserved, together with the satirical drawing and others from Faesi's hand at the department of fine arts of the Zurich Technical University (Graphische Sammlung der Eidgenössischen Technischen Hochschule), whose director has kindly provided us with reproductions.

secretary to the Hospital Administration and may have assumed this post in the following year. In the same year (1826) he married Maria Gessner, also the offspring of a very old family, granddaughter of Johann Caspar Lavater, the 'physiognomist,' daughter of Georg Gessner, Antistes (i.e., leader) of the Zurich Church. The next year, on 7 August 1827, a child was born of this union, Conrad Robert, later a painter and engineer. He was to emigrate in the 1850s to New York, where he married and stayed until his death on 14 February 1883. (The drawings probably reached the United States through this son, the only child of Conrad Faesi.) The little family lived in town, and only when Faesi became administrator of the hospital ('Spitalamtsverwalter'), a charge to which he was elected in 1835, did he move to the official apartment of the hospital director, situated in the western wing of the old Dominican monastery. He was from then on in close contact with his patients; and they were quite numerous. Besides 120 beds for acute patients, there were 340 places for chronic patients and for invalids, 40 places for old people, and 23 beds for mentally disordered (in 1817 a small hospital for the insane had been erected on the hospital premises¹³). As the population of the hospital changed little, Faesi must have known all or nearly all the patients quite well.¹⁴ His drawings show how keenly he observed them; furthermore, his artistic interest may have been aroused by the corners, courts, and manifold houses of the old, romantic place.

Little is known about Faesi's professional activities, but probably he had only little time for drawing, for his work increased when he became in 1842, in addition to his charge, administrator of the new hospital. He resigned in 1853, i.e., before the normal age of retirement, and for this somewhat surprising step we can offer no explanation. Perhaps difficulties in connection with his official position may have contributed to his decision. For the next four or five years he was administrator of a savings bank, after which he retired. He died on 28 September 1870. Little notice was taken of the passing of this man, who had held for many years one of the most important administrative posts of the Zurich State. As an artist, too, he remained unknown.

Can we make out anything about Faesi's character and personality? As we have already mentioned, the facts that would help to form a personal image are scarce, but they are not lacking completely. We know that he

13. For details see Manfred Bleuler (n. 2) and Moriz Hofmann, 'Die Irrenfürsorge im alten Spital und Irrenhaus Zürichs' (Zurich, 1922), medical thesis.

14. Among the patients was the artist Rudolf Meyer (1803-57), immortalized by his casual pupil Gottfried Keller in Keller's novel *Der grüne Heinrich* where Meyer is described as 'Maler Römer.'

was a lieutenant in the Swiss army, and in 1815, during the Napoleonic wars, he was honorably mentioned to the general as commander of the Swiss vanguard. Later he became a captain of cavalry, but he seems to have retired from active military duty. In this respect, the careers of his two brothers were quite different. Two of them became officers in the Russian army, a fact that will astonish only those not familiar with European history at the beginning of the last century.¹⁵ The older brother, Hans Caspar Faesi (1795-1848), was particularly successful. He rose to the rank of general and is often mentioned in the newspapers of his time. His correspondence is very interesting¹⁶ but does not contribute anything to the biography of his brother.

Perhaps new light will be thrown on Conrad Faesi when his correspondence with his friend Johann Caspar Ulrich is published (see note 11). But we already know for certain that Faesi must have been a friendly and helpful man. He assisted the committee for Greek refugees in the early 1820s; he collected garments and various objects for the benefit of the Swiss troops in French service, returning poor and miserable to their country after the French revolution of 1830; and finally he was among the founding members in 1856 of the local society for the protection of animals. Three years later he published a booklet, adorned with his own skillfully composed lithographic prints, to help further the reform of animal vivisection. A doctor's thesis from the institute of physiology of the university offered this opportunity and he admonished the experimenters to prevent pain to the animals as much as possible.¹⁷ So we may suppose that he was very good to the poor patients in his hospital.

We are by no means competent in art matters, but since Faesi's work has not yet attracted the interest of the art scholars, a few words may be said here. Faesi belongs to the *romantic period* in the history of the fine arts in Switzerland.¹⁸ The artists of this rather turbulent time generally possessed great skill in satiric compositions as did Faesi.¹⁹ His abilities as a portraitist are proven by the portrait of Antistes Gessner, his father-in-law.²⁰ The lithographs for the aid of the Greek refugees and those for the

15. Until the mid-nineteenth century the Swiss very often served in foreign armies, partly in special 'Swiss Regiments,' partly, as the Faesi brothers, quite on their own. G. B. Shaw's 'Captain Bluntschli,' the 'Chocolate cream soldier' in *Arms and the man* is not merely a poet's fancy.

16. Emil Usteri, 'Aus der Korrespondenz des Generallieutenants Fäsi,' *Zürcher Taschenbuch*, 1936, pp. 168-234.

17. Herzog and Walser (n. 6).

18. Paul Wescher, *Die Romantik in der Schweizer Malerei* (Frauenfeld, 1947).

19. See n. 12.

20. Herzog and Walser (n. 6).

society for the protection of animals show him as an able, but not a prominent, artist—in German called 'Kleinmeister.' The drawings at Yale add much to the artistic personality of Faesi, and we hope that some day a specialist in Swiss art will make a more complete study of his work.

IV

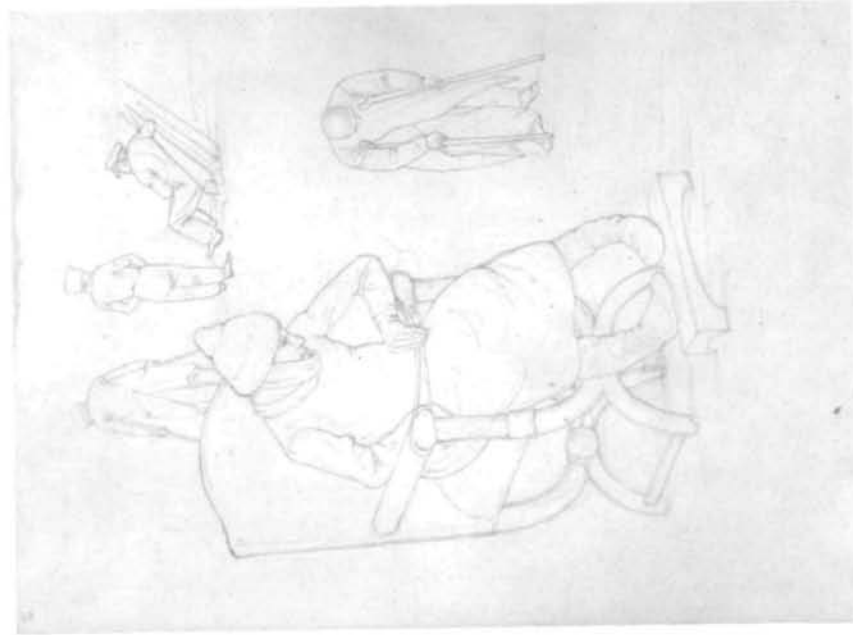
Conrad Faesi's 'hospital drawings' at Yale are contained in eight sketch-books and five single drawings. They are obviously drawn out of artistic, not medical, interest. The patients with whom he lived served Faesi as models. He was primarily attracted by the people themselves, only occasionally choosing his subject elsewhere (part of a garden with swing and other scenes on the grounds, tombstones, perhaps of the hospital cemetery, etc.).

Bedridden persons occur often—it was, after all, a hospital—and these patients seem to be suffering from chronic disease. Faesi was an artist, not a physician, and as artist, he observed very well, so that today we can guess at diagnoses. One patient is doubtless an apoplectic, another appears to suffer from chronic rheumatism (arthritis deformans) since her hands and feet are typically deformed; her invalidism is stressed by the restraining band on her chair (Fig. 1). Other diagnoses are possible: he draws a woman who may be in a state of imbecility (or was she myxoedematic?); another patient represented is obviously a cretin.

But the atmosphere of the place is perhaps rendered most clearly in a drawing (Fig. 2) of an old patient who has been carried into one of the courtyards by two younger inmates; they rest in lazy positions, while the old man seems to be enjoying the open air very much. In the background, the gables of one hospital building and of the insane hospital are seen.²¹ What a picture of peace, friendliness, and 'Beschaulichkeit' (contemplation)! But it is also a picture of inactivity and 'laissez faire.' Small wonder that the right of existence was denied to a hospital of this type by the swift pace of time! Small wonder also, that some of the patients, transferred to more modern institutions, should long for this hospital.

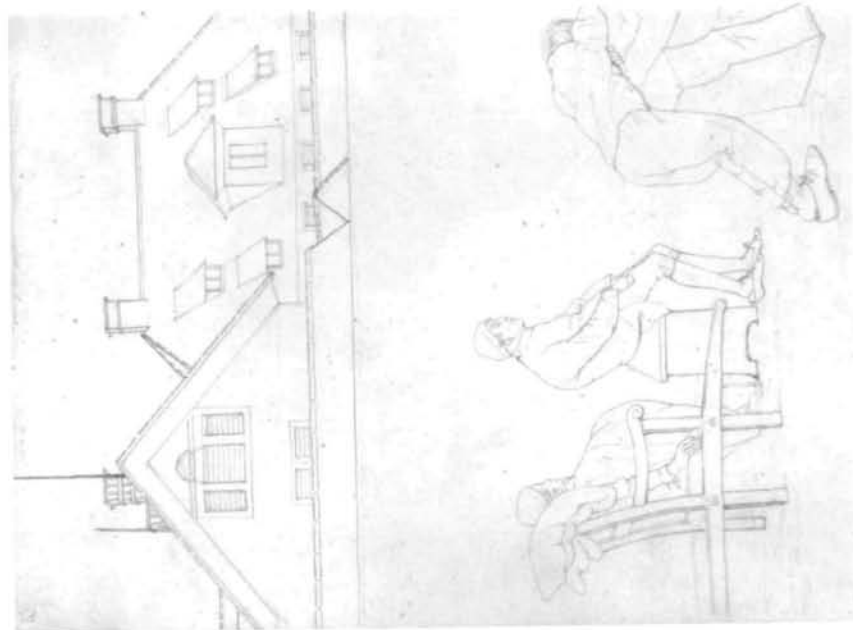
Particularly numerous and significant are the drawings representing patients at work. Certainly the moving human body attracted the artist Faesi, and there is evidence that he devoted great attention to the work of the inmates. He was quite aware that appropriate work to keep the patients from idleness is an important means of improving their mental

21. For the identification of the hospital buildings we are indebted to Mr. Steinmann of the Zurich City Archives.



Yale Medical Library

FIG. 1. Invalid female patient probably suffering from chronic joint rheumatism—at least the hand and foot deformities are typical of this disease. Two of the smaller sketches possibly portray patients with the same disease. (Spital-Typen Arbeiter, No. 14, p. 2. Courtesy of the Yale Medical Library.)



Yale Medical Library

FIG. 2. An old man, probably suffering from abdominal dropsy, who has been taken to the courtyard by two other hospital members. In the background to the left is the gable end of the madhouse, to the right, the gable end of the Neuhaus. (Spital-Typen Arbeiter, No. 14, p. 4. Courtesy of the Yale Medical Library.)

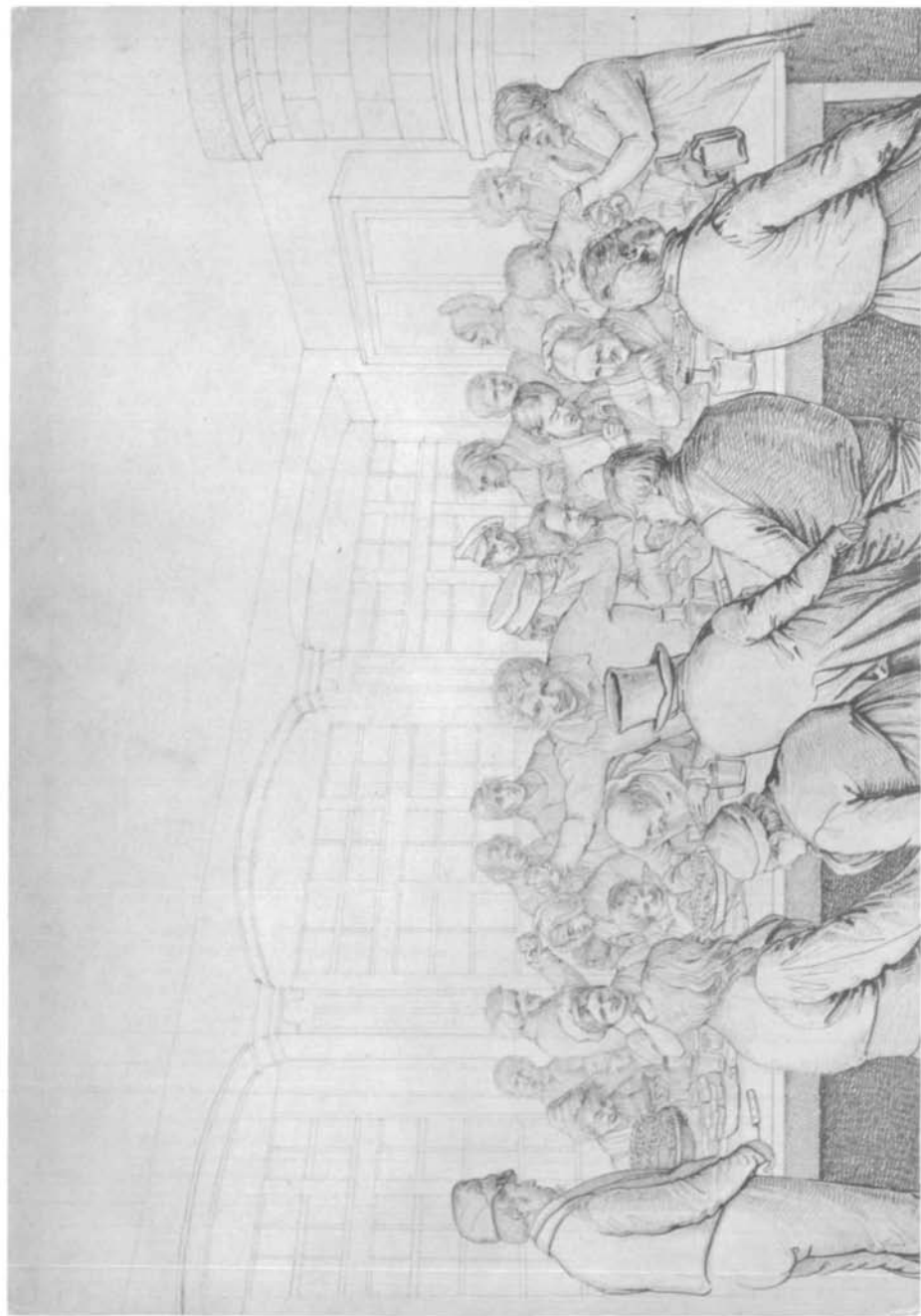


FIG. 3. Festive meal of beneficiaries and patients in the Oberfründerstube of the hospital. The detailed facial characterization is remarkable. (Original drawing. Courtesy of the Yale Medical Library.)

health.²² He portrays spinning,²³ weaving, and bedmaking. In the Yale drawings other activities are represented such as the chopping and piling of wood,²⁴ and a special kind of work with hammers, probably pounding and pulverizing sandstone for scouring and blotting sand.²⁵ This work was often done in groups, and there is a particularly nice drawing of a group of nine women in a vaulted room. Some scenes like those he drew may even nowadays be met in a psychiatric asylum! Probably the 'sawing apparatus' which appears in one drawing was constructed to enable invalid patients to take part in the common work. All these activities were understood by Faesi as beneficial for the patients' mental health, therefore it was not mere poorhouse labor, welcome as this might have been for the economy of the hospital. Nevertheless, one cannot yet speak of 'occupational therapy.' This form of psychiatric treatment was introduced at a later period.

Were there psychiatric patients among those drawn by Faesi? There is no proof, yet we might imagine depressed patients in two drawings. One of them is comforted by a man in a dress coat—perhaps a minister? He would not have been the only one in Faesi's time to assume such a duty. Besides, it should be mentioned here that the old hospital was not only the cradle of the Zurich medical school but the starting point for the later world-famous Swiss psychiatric school. In the rooms of the old hospital Wilhelm Griesinger started his psychiatric teaching about 1864, and the psychiatric clinic 'Burghölzli,' where men such as August Forel and Eugen Bleuler were to work, took over in 1870 some of the psychiatric patients of the old hospital.²⁶ Other psychiatric patients had been transferred in 1867 to the Rheinau hospital, a secularized monastery adapted as a psychiatric hospital.²⁷

Community life, as it existed in the old hospital, is clearly shown in two of the finest single drawings,²⁸ one of feasting patients obviously enjoying their meal (Fig. 3). The room is a homelike one in the old monastery building, identified as 'Oberpfänderstube' (upper room for the boarders). Probably only patients are sitting at the table, while in the second drawing

22. J. K. Faesi, *Ein Wort an das Publikum zu Stadt und Land und besonders an die Tit. Mitglieder des Grossen Rates von Seite der Pflege und oder Verwaltung des Cantons-Spitals in Zurich* (Zurich, 1832).

23. This drawing is preserved, among others of Faesi's, in the library of the 'Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft,' Zurich. We are very grateful for the reproductions.

24. Sketchbook No. 14, 'Spital-Typen arbeiter,' pp. 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 28, 31.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 13, 15, 17, 23.

26. Manfred Bleuler (n. 2).

27. Hans H. Walser, 'Hundert Jahre Klinik Rheinau 1867-1967,' in press.

28. In Fry Collection, Yale.

—a singing lesson in the same room—patients and attendants are both taking part.

One other point should be mentioned. As we have said, Faesi possessed a satirical vein. But in all his drawings dealing with 'his' hospital, no trace of mockery or even of a critical attitude can be seen. Obviously he was quite content with the place. Was he unhappy to see the whole house doomed to destruction? We do not know. But his drawings give us a unique insight into the hospital life of his time.

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